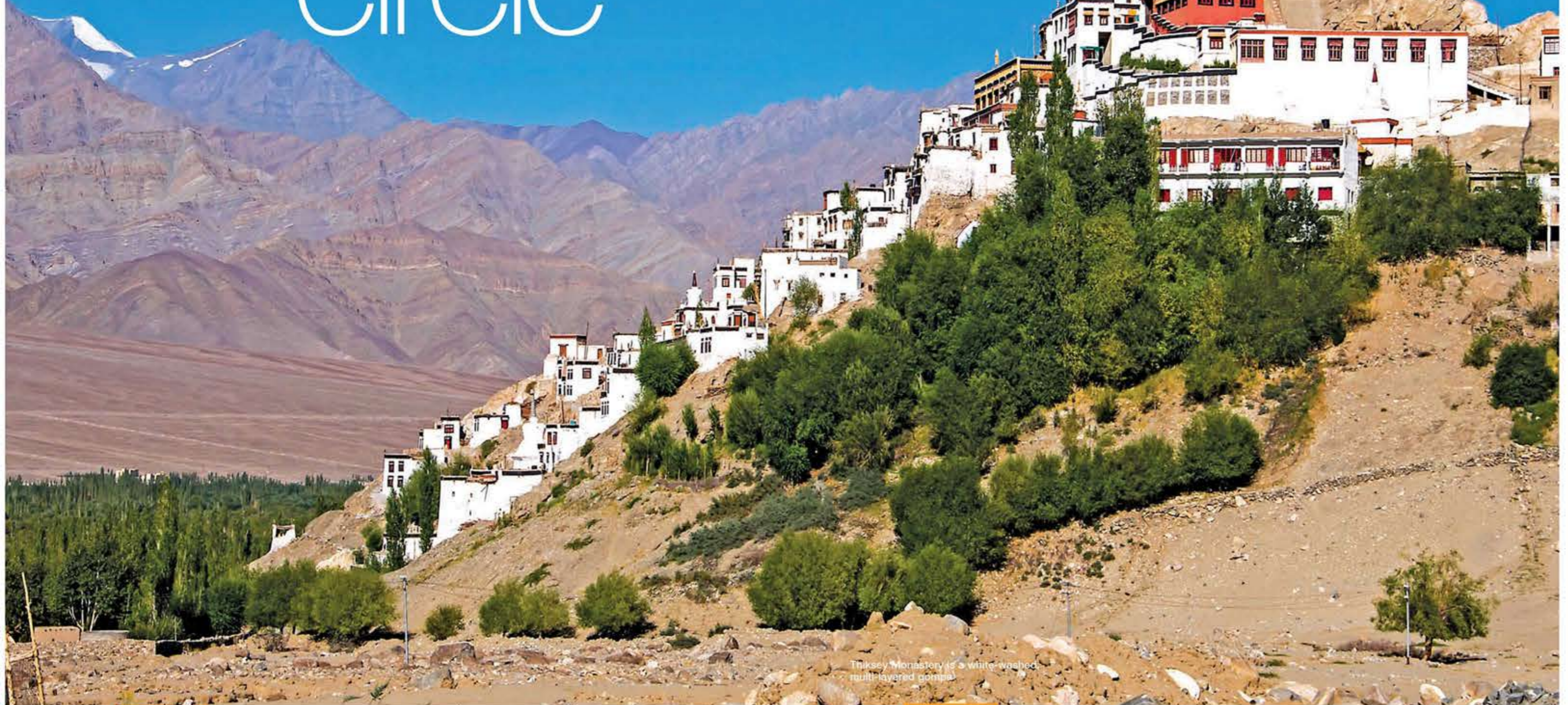


The spiritual circle

GOMPA HOPPING IN LEH MAKES ONE DELVE INTO THE REALM OF THE ESOTERIC WHERE CREATURE COMFORTS DO NOT MATTER IN THE PURSUIT OF NIRVANA. GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI DOCUMENT THEIR PERSONAL QUEST



Thiksey Monastery is a white-washed hilltop abode

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The rays of a wan sun brushed the snow-dusted peaks of the Stok Kangri range that unrolled like a sheet of rumpled tin outside the large picture window of our room. We tumbled out of our cosy bed at The Grand Dragon Ladakh to attend morning prayers at Thiksey monastery, a half-hour drive away and one of the largest gompas or monasteries in Ladakh.

Were we crazy to abandon, at the crack of dawn, the coddling and cosseting of our luxe hotel where the views were alluring enough to make us want to linger indefinitely in its confines? On our first two mornings in Leh, we had woken up to the sight of serrated peaks clawing at a blue sky as we had been told to lie in, in order to get acclimatised to the rarefied air in this high altitude desert. (Leh is located at 11,562 ft and even the fittest can feel breathless and experience waves of

nausea and other symptoms of high-altitude sickness.) Half asleep, we clambered into our car and on arrival at Thiksey monastery, a wondrous sight greeted us — a white-washed, multi-layered gompa that seemed to cascade down the folds of the mountain like a stony waterfall frozen in mid-tumble.

We then puffed up the steep steps of the monastery, envying the nimble-footed, red-robed monks who managed to vault up like mountain goats. Suddenly, we found ourselves on an open terrace where two monks stood, backs ramrod straight, holding long, curved copper trumpets. Around them, fissured mountains heaved up from the earth like huge seismic bumps. The monks blew the trumpets and the sound echoed around the valley, sounding like the moans of an insomniac giant!

They then blew an ornate conch shell whose low

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timbre call seemed to ripple and stir the wheat and barley fields way below. The trumpets had duly awakened the monks from their slumber and they shuffled into a red-pillared prayer hall, prostrating themselves in front of a large statue of the Buddha, before taking their place at a low red-painted table. The hall was aglow with colour, thanks to vivid murals and

beautifully painted *tangkas* and the large green drums placed on the low tables. We sat down with other tourists in a corner of the room as drums pounded and cymbals crashed in heady waves of sound. The lamas spun a magical spell around us and slowly drew us into a timeless spiritual tableau till we almost forgot our surroundings.

Thiksey Monastery is aglow with multiple hues



View of the mountains surrounding Leh



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TRAVEL 19



(Above) Devotee in traditional robes outside the city's main shrine. (Below) The toothless smile of an elderly monk.



Some of the little monks sat in a corner, their round shaved heads slumped on the low tables only to jerk awake when chastised by an older monk to pay attention. But that morning, their eyes were heavy-lidded with sleep and we wanted to whisk some of them away to our luxurious, centrally-heated hotel; away from the Spartan chilly confines of a mountain-top monastery. In Ladakh, each family opts to give the second son to a monastery, an age-old tradition, which ensured that at least one member of the family would be educated.

Energised by what we had seen and heard, we headed back to the Grand Dragon for an alfresco breakfast on the terrace of the Zasgyath coffee shop with its exquisite gilded Ladakhi woodwork, reminiscent of the pillared prayer halls of the gompas. We revelled in the cool embrace of a land that has preserved its traditions and the purity of its landscapes. In the crisp clean air of Leh, the dun-coloured mountains change colour like chameleons even as they seem to revel in the play of light and shadow. At times, they take on a purple hue, at other times, subdued shades of violet, blue and even pink.

And on top of some of them, gompas perch precariously like the secret lair of a dragon in a child's fairy tale. The gompas are festooned with prayer flags that flutter and speed the wishes and prayers of devotees to the heavens while believers turn large gilded prayer wheels clockwise to invoke divine grace. Most monasteries have giant statues of Lord Buddha or other figures from the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon that glow in the dim light.

Even within our hotel, the treasures of Ladakh were within arm's reach. Some of the rooms of the Grand



(Inset) Shanti Stupa was built in 1991

Dragon Ladakh showcase views of Leh Palace and Shanti Stupa (built in 1991), both iconic structures. The nine-storey Leh Palace has a passing resemblance to Lhasa's Potala Palace and has been deserted since 1846 when the royals were dethroned in a coup and moved to Stok Palace. An uneven dusty path from the palace leads to the 16th century Namgyal Tsemo Gompa, overlooking the old quarter of Leh.

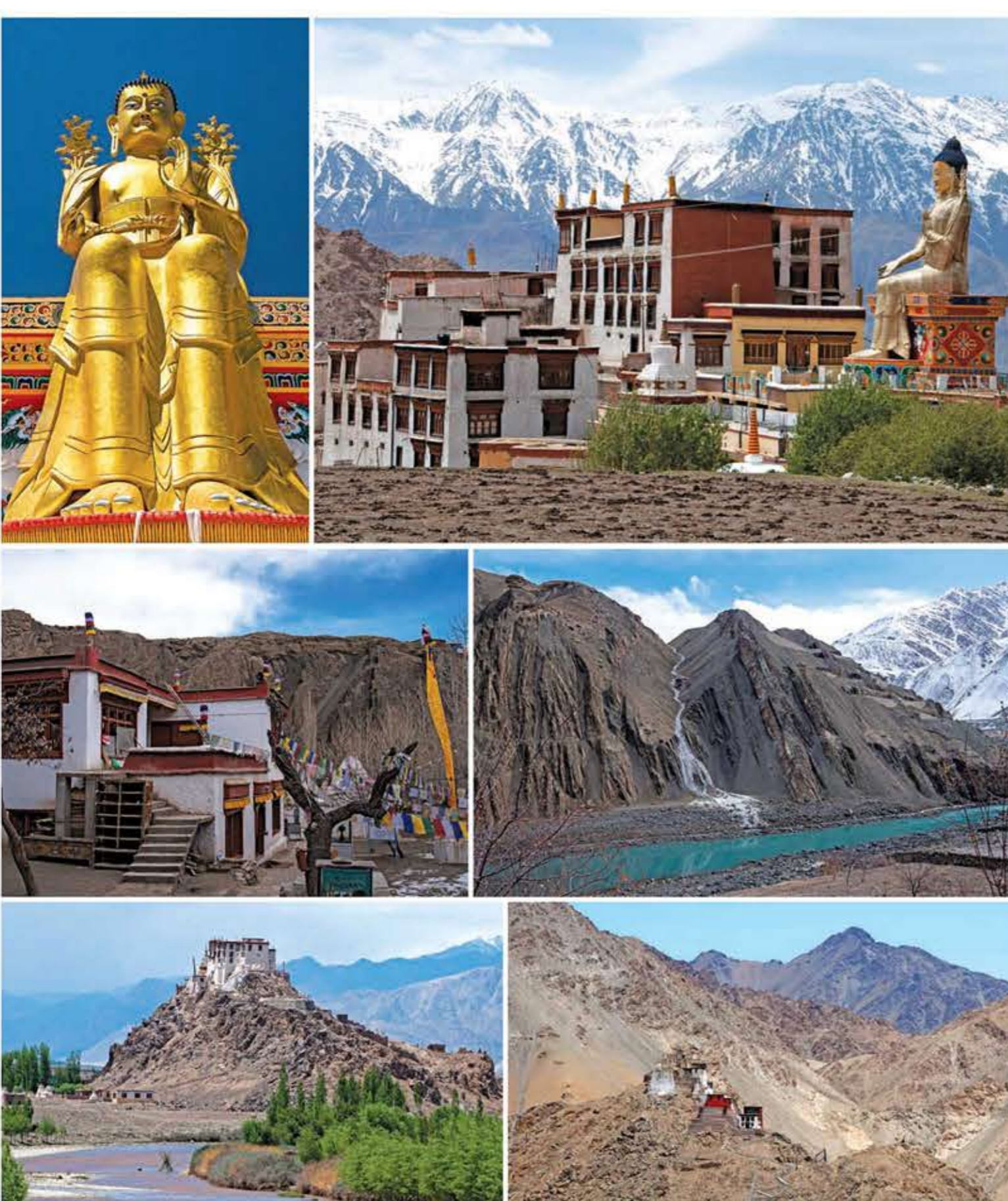
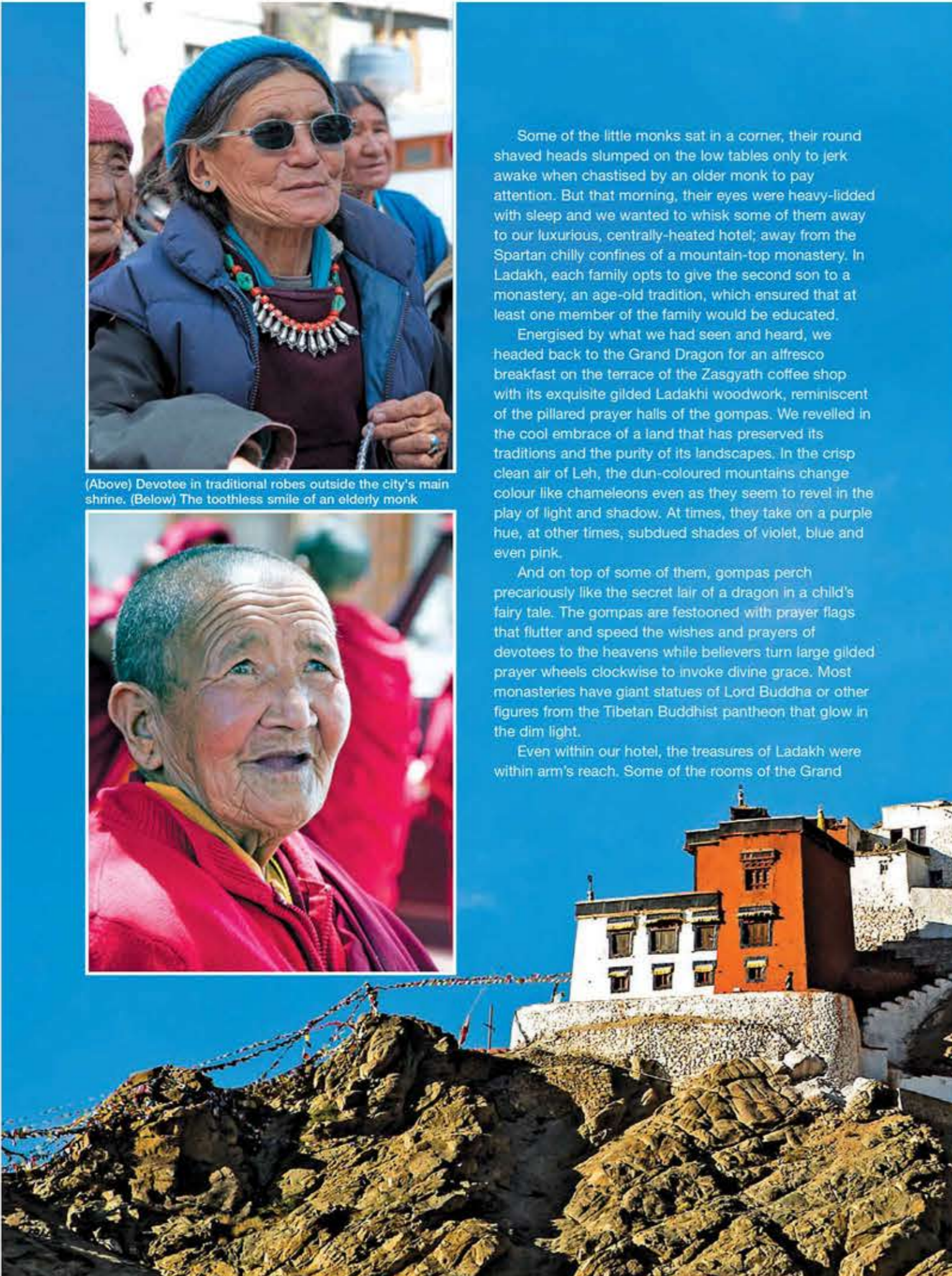
The next morning, we were on our way to the monasteries of Likir and Alchi, two hours' drive from Leh. Our car sped on narrow roads that traced the bulging belly of the mountains. On one side, in the depths of a ravine, a playful Indus flowed, on the other side were harsh rocky cliffs. A couple of times, we saw a lonely robed figure sitting by a crumbling chorten, dwarfed by the vastness of the sky and landscape.

Thirty-six kilometres from Leh and just short of Nimmu, we saw another amazing sight — the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers. From our elevated vantage point, we could see the merging of the waters of the two rivers — one muddy and the other a jade-green.

The Indus kept us company for a while till we arrived at the turnoff for Likir village. Likir served

FACTFILE

- There are a number of early morning flights from Delhi to Leh and one-stop flights from Mumbai.
- One can travel by road to Leh from either Srinagar (434 km) or Manali (474 km) but the scenic roads to paradise are bumpy.
- Leh has plenty of accommodation ranging from clean guest houses to luxury hotels including the uber luxurious 76-room The Grand Dragon Ladakh.



(Clockwise from top left): Gilded Buddha at Likir Monastery; A hilltop gompa, the Likir Monastery; Indus flows by the base of one of the many monasteries and Alchi Monastery



Just short of Nimmu is the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers

up another dramatic spectacle — a hilltop gompa embraced by a wide arc of snow-kissed mountains. As we drove up a twisting road to the monastery, a soaring golden Maitreya or Future Buddha statue rose to the blue skies, lidded with candy-floss clouds.

Founded in the 11th century under the direction of Tibetan monks and extensively renovated in the 18th, Likir seemed to float in a pool of silence and divinity. There was no sign of the 100 monks who are said to live there nor of the Dalai Lama's younger brother who heads it. Opposite his modest residence is a museum with valuable (some over 500 years old) *tangkas*.

The main Dukhang or assembly hall was overpowering with large all-seeing statues of Sakyamuni (the Historical Buddha), Maitreya and Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Yellow Hat sect. The new assembly hall is dominated by an awesome image of Avalokitesvara with 11 heads and a few thousand arms.

We then headed for Alchi driving along a road, hemmed by belligerent mountains. We soon discovered that the region's oldest monastery snuggles in the midst of charming village homes that snooze amidst apricot trees. Once inside the 10th century complex, awe took

over at the sight of some of the richest and finest collections of paintings and giant Buddha statues in the three-storey high Sum-stek Temple and two other gem-like temples.

Back at the Grand Dragon Ladakh, we savoured a typical Ladakhi dinner of local soup, momos, vegetarian stew even as the snow-cuddled mountains glimmered in the moonlight like a surreal Valhalla of the Gods. We reminisced about our trip the previous winter to Hemis, Ladakh's most famous monastic complex which snuggles in a hidden valley of poplars and in the shadow of muscled mountains. In that bone-chilling winter, its magnificent central courtyard and buildings were deserted except for the sight of a solitary red-robed figure trudging across ankle-deep snow. He told us that many of his spiritual soulmates were meditating in the mountain caves.

At that point, we felt a deep sense of gratitude for the bouquet of creature comforts that the Grand Dragon Ladakh offers its guests; in a vast rugged often inhospitable land; yet, we were suffused with admiration for those holy monks meditating in their caves. Triumphant mortal reality with human will.

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